

THE ALTIS

PORTRAITS OF THE IMMORTALS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN COOPER

The Olympics were so intertwined in ancient Greek culture that their calendar was actually based on the passing of a 4-year cycle, known to this day as an Olympiad. All wars were suspended during this period and every traveler's safe passage was guaranteed to and from the Altis, the site of the games. The term '*Altis*' comes from the Greek name for the sacred olive grove where the ancient Olympic games geographically took place. The games were open to all free men from the known Greek world; athletes from the Near East to the north of Africa, southern Europe and into Spain were all represented. It was truly a multi-national affair. There were no gold, silver or bronze medals at the ancient games. Either you won or you lost. Victors received goods of transient value such as fruit or simple wreaths of branches. However, when an athlete won at the games, he was considered almost god-like and revered as an *Immortal*.

By 776 BC, the ancient Greek games were flourishing primarily as religious rituals to honor their gods. This ritual specifically excluded women. Female participation was punishable by death. It would not be until 1900 AD, the first time in western history, that the opportunity opened for women to participate during the modern revival of the Olympic games.

My photographic series, *The Altis: Portraits of the Immortals*, is a project celebrating freedom of expression, civil liberties, and sexual equality, often taken for granted in our contemporary context till now that our nation faces foes who suppress these rights. By setting *The Altis* in the ancient times of the Olympic games, my statement is one that opposes religious and sexual discrimination. Casting the project exclusively with women would have been blasphemy in the eyes of the ancients, but for me it's a tactical use of history for the premise of artistic invention. The freedom to create this body of work without persecution exists as evidence of cultural evolution in our living times.

- Martin Cooper